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QUOTIDIANA

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T I D I A N A

PATRICK MADDEN



*University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London*

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Set in Arno by Bob Reitz.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

For Karina, eternamente

From the most ordinary, commonplace,
familiar things, if we could put them
in their proper light, can be formed the
greatest miracles of nature and the most
wondrous examples.

MONTAIGNE "Of Experience"

The most common actions — a
walk, a talk, solitude in one's own
orchard — can be enhanced and lit up
by the association of the mind.

VIRGINIA WOOLF "Montaigne"

Consider the circumvolutions of the
human mind, where no short or direct
routes exist.

JOSÉ SARAMAGO *Essay on Blindness*

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“Finity” first appeared in *The Iowa Review* 38.1 (Spring 2008).

QUOTIDIANA

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The Infinite Suggestiveness of Common Things

A quick ear and eye, an ability to discern the infinite suggestiveness of common things, a brooding meditative spirit, are all that the essayist requires.

ALEXANDER SMITH “On the Writing of Essays”

A few years ago, a curmudgeonly professor, a guy who was always giving me a hard time about my genre, asked, “What will you do when you run out of experiences to write about?” He wanted me to admit that I’d have to turn to fiction or suffer the ignominy of rewriting the same handful of exciting experiences I’d had in my life.

I answered him by saying something about having children, how they were a renewable source of writing material, with their quirks and insights and inscrutable ways. And it’s true: kids are full of wisdom that you can write from. Not too long ago, my oldest daughter, who speaks both English and Spanish, misunderstood the Paul McCartney song “Coming Up” to say “*Caminar* like a flower,” which is, “Walk like a flower,” which I like better than “Walk like an Egyptian,” at least. And just the other day, another daughter, whom I’d just put to bed, grew impatient waiting for me to bring her a tissue. When I finally appeared, she pointed to her nose and explained, “I put the booger back.” At least she didn’t wipe it on the blanket.

The essay is an open, leisurely form, somewhat allergic to adventure, certainly opposed to sensationalism. Even Montaigne, when he encounters a “monstrous child,” a traveling freak show exploited by his uncle for profit, turns his thoughts to a subversion of common notions of “natural,” with barely a mention of the exotic scene he’s witnessed. During my first extended encounters with the essay, I was struck (dumbstruck, moonstruck) by those authors who wrote from seemingly insignificant, overlooked, transient things, experiences, and ideas, who were able to find within their everyday, unexceptional lives inspiration for essaying. What is it Phillip Lopate says in the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*? He says, “The essayist . . . aligns himself with what is traditionally considered a female perspective, in its appreciation of sentiment, dailiness, and the domestic.”

While children are certainly part of the daily and domestic, that’s not how I should have answered my antagonistic amigo. Would that I had known then Alexander Smith, the nineteenth-century Scottish “spasmodic” poet whose essays, recently, have been a revelation to me. Here is *trepverter, l’esprit de l’escalier*,¹ if I’ve ever known it. Professor Thayer, this is what I would say to you now:

The essay-writer has no lack of subject-matter. He has the day that is passing over his head; and, if unsatisfied with that, he has the world’s six thousand years to depasture his gay or serious humour upon. I idle away my time here, and I am finding new subjects every hour. Everything I see or hear is an essay in bud. The world is everywhere whispering essays, and one need only be the world’s amanuensis.

Because I only recently learned the word *amanuensis*, I thought I’d allow you, dear reader, a bit of my own process.

As often happens, I learned the word then heard it again several times in the following week. Shortly after my first contact, in the above quote from Smith's "On the Writing of Essays," I met it again in my friend Stephen Tuttle's short story "Amanuensis," about a disappeared junior high school biology teacher with a scale model of the town in his basement. Then, as I studied the biography of essayist Vernon Lee, a.k.a. Violet Paget, I learned that she had acted as an amanuensis for her sickly older brother, poet Eugene Hamilton-Lee. By then, of course, I had looked it up in several dictionaries, but even before I knew what it meant, I liked the word and knew it was important. Just look at it: *amanuensis*. Is that French? It has as many vowels as consonants. It's an anagram for "sun amnesia" and "sane animus" and "manna issue" (which all sound wonderfully fascinating, don't they?). But what does it mean? You may be disappointed to learn that an amanuensis is a secretary or stenographer, "one employed to write from dictation or to copy manuscript." But if you think instead of a cloistered monk toiling by candlelight at some glorious copywork, taking pains not just to write but to draw letters, to illustrate, to infuse his work with spirit and reverence, then you will be closer to the notions the word conveys to me.

Amanuensis is a fine word, but my favorite word is *quotidian*, a word I learned later in life, from Spanish, and which I pined for, eagerly sought in English, until one magical day I found it. Let's back up: in the early 1990s I was living in Uruguay as a missionary, picking up Spanish from conversations and signs, and I kept hearing the phrase *la vida cotidiana*. This, I surmised or discovered, meant "everyday life." But the choice of words seemed so elegant, and that adjective, *cotidiana*, so unlike what it meant, that I fell in love. What a word to mean

“mundane, everyday, common, etc.”! So beautiful, so seemingly opposite its meaning!

When I returned to New Jersey, one of my first tasks was to find this *cotidiana* in English. Knowing that the French influence on English left a rich legacy of Latinate words, which vary from their Spanish cognates by a letter or two, to the dictionary I went. From the dictionary I came, disappointed. There was no such word, not even in the library’s multivolume OED.

Meanwhile, I began my graduate studies in English, hoping to learn how to write, to become an essayist. Then I learned that essays were not stories, did not focus on great adventures or recoveries, were not extraordinary in their subject matter at all. Essayists are keen observers of the overlooked, the ignored, the seemingly unimportant. They can make the mundane resplendent with their meditative insights.

Then one day, as I was leafing through the dictionary —

Researches, however great or small, [are] great pleasures in themselves, full of serendipity; I have rarely paged through one of my dictionaries . . . without my eye lighting, along the way, on words more beautiful than a found fall leaf.

WILLIAM GASS “In Defense of the Book”

— my eye alighted on the word I had been searching for all these years, the word I had hoped for, had almost wished into existence: *quotidian*, with a Q. This was a revelation.

Of course, I then began to read about quotidian writings and concerns in essays and essays on essays, and I began to doubt my own awareness of the world around me. Surely this word had crossed my path before, in other readings, other essays; and yet, maybe not. Perhaps *quotidian* was absent from my life until my need for it became great enough.

And maybe simply knowing the word made me more aware of the world, more open to the miracles drifting by.

The fastidious habits of polished life generally incline us to reject, as incapable of interesting us, whatever does not present itself in a graceful shape of its own, and a ready-made suit of ornaments. But some of the plainest weeds become beautiful under the microscope. It is the benevolent provision of nature, that in proportion as you feel the necessity of extracting interest from common things, you are enabled to do so.

LEIGH HUNT "On Washerwomen"

One day as I sat at my bedroom computer, writing who-knowswhat, Adriana, then almost three months old, began to laugh behind me on the bed. I turned to see what she was laughing at but could find nothing. Thankfully, I recognized the world whispering, put fingers to keyboard, let the ideas collaborate and grow.

That daughter is now ten years old, and that essay may well be the first good thing I ever wrote. So maybe the value of children, from a writerly standpoint, coincides with the value of the quotidian. Children may awaken us to the marvels slipping past us, almost unnoticed. Scott Russell Sanders, who writes a mean quotidian essay himself, spoke to this in a 1997 Lannan Foundation interview with Bernard Cooper:

We sleepwalk through most of our lives . . . and . . . every once in a while something happens . . . outside ourselves that forces us to pay attention in a new way, or something happens inside us that enables us to pay attention in a new way. And we suddenly realize that the world is so much richer, and more magnificent, and more wonderful than we had felt for a long time. Not to sentimentalize . . . , but

I think children live much more continuously in a state of awareness of the miraculousness of existence.

I want a genre that allows for the staid, mundane life of a loafer, that reaches for new connections, that recognizes “the world in a grain of sand” (Blake). Of course, to stick to surfaces, to slither hither and yon but never move beyond the everyday, that would be . . . superficial, suicidal. A successful commonplace essay will gather memories and researches, attach ideas and stories to build upward, toward meaning. Again, Alexander Smith:

[The essayist] lifts a pebble from the ground, and puts it aside more carefully than any gem; and on a nail in a cottage-door he will hang the mantle of his thought. . . . He finds his way into the Elysian fields through portals the most shabby and commonplace. . . . Let him take up the most trivial subject, and it will lead him away to the great questions over which the serious imagination loves to brood — fortune, mutability, death.

This is not to say that the essay can’t allow for some extraordinary experience — it is, as Phillip Lopate says, a “wonderfully tolerant form” — but I am inclined to agree with Theodor Adorno that “the bad essay tells stories about people instead of elucidating the matter at hand.” I prefer the intellectual surprises wrought from “render[ing] the transient eternal” (Adorno again), the essay I halfway recognize as containing my “own discarded thoughts” (Emerson) or wish I had been observant and curious enough to see. So does Joseph Epstein:

I prefer when the essay takes a small, very particular subject and, through the force of the essayist’s artistically controlled maunderings, touches on unpredictably large

general matters, makes hitherto unexpected conclusions, tells me things I hadn't hitherto known, or reminds me of other things I have always known but never thought to formulate so well.

The Best American Essays 1993

The fact is that essayists have been doing this sort of thing for centuries. Montaigne, who gave us the name for the form and its first, best examples, proclaimed repeatedly the tenet of writing from ordinary things:

Of the most ordinary, common, and known things, could we but find out their light, the greatest miracles of nature might be formed, and the most wondrous examples.

“Of Experience”

Centuries later, under the influence of the master, William Hazlitt was carried away almost to ecstasy thinking about the infinite possibilities that life offers for thought and writing:

It is the very extent of human life, the infinite number of things contained in it, its contradictory and fluctuating interests, the transition from one situation to another, the hours, months, years spent in one fond pursuit after another [that], baffling the grasp of our actual perception, make it slide from our memory. . . . What canvas would be big enough to hold its striking groups, its endless subjects! . . . What a huge heap, a “huge, dumb heap,” of wishes, thoughts, feelings, anxious cares, soothing hopes, loves, joys, friendships, it is composed of! How many ideas and trains of sentiment, long and deep and intense, often pass through the mind in only one day's thinking or reading, for instance!

“On the Past and Future”

The Infinite Suggestiveness 7

You begin to sense the dizzying possibilities inherent in such a childlike curiosity, the dangers of noticing everything all the time, yet this is a valuable perspective to have, a useful practice to know, for teachers and writers alike. When I have taught the “personal narrative” in freshman composition courses — before I knew what I know now — students inevitably sought their most dramatic, easily significant experiences. For the majority of them, this translated to tales of loss or conquest. Grandparents died; girlfriends broke up with boyfriends; young athletes were nearly cut from school sports teams only to rise up and win a starting spot in the squad, then, preferably, to make the winning shot in the state championships. But my students were unable to write beyond clichés, received ideas, or meanings gathered largely, I presume, from movies and sit-coms. They were force-fitting their experiences to preexisting legends. They were stifling their own thinking in order to match up. Sir Joshua Reynolds, an eighteenth-century British painter who portrayed some of our early essayists (Johnson, Burke, Goldsmith, Sterne), once said, “There is no expedient to which a man will not resort in order to avoid the real effort of thinking.” Thomas Edison had this saying framed in every room of his West Orange laboratories.

David Shields is of this mind:

The world exists. Why recreate it? I want to think about it, try to understand it. . . . I want a literature built entirely out of contemplation and revelation. . . . The real story isn’t the drama of what happens; it’s what we’re thinking about while nothing, or very little, is happening.

“Reality Hunger: A Manifesto”

Writing from the everyday, straining toward new connection, new meaning, is not necessarily easy, but even at its worst, it beats writing banalities as if they were revelation. It is also

a stay against the perfidious notion that I, or you, or they, are inherently interesting or important to a world of strangers. Our minds, on the other hand, may offer somewhat of interest to coexplore.

In an interview with Joseph Cuomo, W. G. Sebald gave these matter-of-fact instructions, a kind of play-by-play of the essaying process:

As you walk along, you find things . . . by the wayside or you buy a brochure written by a local historian which is in a tiny little museum somewhere . . . and in that you find odd details that lead you somewhere else, and so it's a form of unsystematic searching. . . . So you then have a small amount of material and you accumulate things, . . . and one thing takes you to another, and you make something out of these haphazardly assembled materials. And, as they have been assembled in this random fashion, you have to strain your imagination in order to create a connection between . . . things. If you look for things that are like the things that you have looked for before, then, obviously, they'll connect up. But they'll only connect up in an obvious sort of way, which actually isn't, in terms of writing something new, very productive. You have to take heterogeneous materials in order to get your mind to do something that it hasn't done before.

So let's think more, ponder, wonder, meander, maunder. Despite appearances to the contrary, despite the clamor and clang of true-life sensationalism in every medium, quotidian essays are being written and published all the time. They're an antidote to the harried hullabaloo of — what? — talk shows? tabloids? the madding crowd? And so I (and my friends, known and unknown) continue this quiet labor, stopping to smell the roses, suspicious that the tree falling in the forest *does*

make a sound, the cat in the box might as well be alive. The exercise of writing from the infinite suggestiveness of common things has proved fruitful for me time and again, with essays sparked by considerations of garlic, diaper changing, washing grapes, a chipped tooth, and others. I'm addicted to that world's whisper.

And in case you were wondering, that curmudgeonly professor who likes to bust my chops: his latest book is a memoir, a kind of catalog of the everyday life of a Mormon boy in 1930s Provo, Utah. I've still not tried my hand at fiction.

p.s. Although I now own the domain (at regular price, \$6 a year) and use it as a repository for essay resources and an anthology of classical essays, when I first tried to register *quotidiana.com*, it was already owned by a cybersquatter who wanted to sell it to me for \$2,500. The handy domain registrar's name-suggester gave me the following alternatives to consider:

everydaya.com, mundanea.com, routinea.com,
unremarkablea.com, workadaya.com, ordinarya.
com, averagea.com, commona.com, mediocrea.com,
simplea.com, so-soa.com, tolerablea.com, faira.com,
passablea.com, commonplacea.com, indifferentia.com,
nondescripta.com, middlinga.com, moderatea.com,
reasonablea.com, usuala.com, runofthemilla.com

NOTES

1. Speaking of words one wishes for, both Yiddish and French have terms for the witty retort one thinks of only too late, after the heat of verbal battle, when one is on the stairs, on the way out. English, that great amalgamator, must simply borrow these right-on phrases.